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Who Speaks for Who

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Critical and Curatorial Studies

by

Virginia Teresa Arce

Thesis Committee:
Professor Juli Carson, Chair
Associate Professor Bridget Cooks
Assistant Professor Litia Perta
Professor Simon Leung

2017

DEDICATION

To

Maria and Jose Arce

for your love, sacrifice, and unwavering support,
por todo su amor, sacrificio, y apoyo.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Who Speaks for Who

By

Virginia Teresa Arce

Master of Fine Arts in Critical and Curatorial Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Juli Carson, Chair

The exhibition *Who Gets To Look*, which took place in the University Art Gallery in Irvine, California, featured Erik Benjamins' multimedia installation, *A group of elderly ramblers passed by our front door on the way to their hearth...* (2016), and Sable Elyse Smith's single channel videos *How We Tell Stories To Children* (2015), *untitled: Self-Portrait* (2013), *Men Who Swallow Themselves In Mirrors* (2016), and a sculpture titled *Landscape I* (2016). Each artist grounded their work in sites of extreme social mediation. Benjamins' work, comprised of text and field recordings of music and performances that took place in People's Park in Chengdu, China, examined conventions of home and abroad, comfort and discomfort, through the lens of tourism. Smith's videos, informed by popular and personal narratives of prison and racialized violence, complicated the boundaries between myth and reality, prompting a consideration of the consequences of representation. By bringing these artworks into conversation with one another, the exhibition sought to reveal how these differing bodies of work challenged notions of personal and national identities being natural, cohesive, and stable. The following thesis, *Who Speaks for*

Who, builds on the theoretical framework of the exhibition to analyze the aesthetic and political propositions that these works implicitly make. As I examine resonances between Benjamins' and Smith's bodies of work, my aim is to illustrate how each artist considers the ways in which un-critical modes of viewership insidiously work against the possibility for critical interrogations of identification informed by social constructs and nationalist ideologies.

WHO GETS TO LOOK

The exhibition *Who Gets To Look* presented the first iteration of Erik Benjamins' *A group of elderly ramblers passed by our front door on the way to their hearth...*, a sound and text installation informed by the artist's stay in Sichuan, China in the spring of 2016. The exhibition also included Sable Elyse Smith's single channel videos *Men Who Swallow Themselves In Mirrors*, *How We Tell Stories To Children*, *untitled: Self-Portrait*, and a neon sculpture titled *Landscape 1*. In placing these works in conversation with one another, I sought to draw them into a line of inquiry that was unconventional for each artist's practice. Smith's interdisciplinary body of work, which explores and interrogates the psychic trauma that lies in the wake of the American industrial prison complex and popular media's fetishizing of black bodies, had largely been presented alongside other works that consider the intersections of race, the justice system, language, and violence. Alternately, Benjamins' work, which also employs a cross section of mediums, had typically been situated alongside works that consider time, ephemerality, embodiment, and intuitive forms of participation with aesthetics.

In the exhibition's formative stages, the conceptual framework for bringing these artist's works together and the resonances between them developed slowly. At the outset I asked myself what a prisoner and a tourist have in common. A hasty consideration of the relationship between tourism and tourists, prison and prisoners, would yield that such a juxtaposition could only underscore and re-inscribe existing binaries, and, moreover, that grouping these works was largely

an exercise in contrasting perceived ontological differences¹ between freedom and captivity, privilege and deprivation, who has and who has not. However, a conclusion such as this would be conflating surface with substance and would absolve viewers and myself from a necessary unsettling engendered by these works that is both generative and troubling. Although the point of departure for each body of work was a site of extreme social mediation, the manner in which they each shed light on entrenched notions of identification, and the mechanisms they employ to prompt viewers' conscious alienation, suggested that they were in fact much more similar than dissimilar. Perhaps, then, a better question would be what conventional notions of a prisoner and a tourist have in common. The following text is a reflection of the unforeseen parallels between Benjamins' and Smith's works and why these parallels urge attention and investigation. This text will attempt to serve multiple functions: to examine nuances in the aforementioned works, to situate them alongside ideas that seek to undo and move against the myth that one person's identity or experience can ever be purported to represent some cohesion within a larger group, and to consider what is at stake in the foreclose of the freedom to speak to diverging experiences and modes of self identification.

YOU MUST IDENTIFY...

Within the exhibition, the use of scale employed in the presentation of Sable Elyse Smith's videos and sculpture served to establish a sense of simultaneous intimacy and distance between the viewer and subject matter addressed by the works. The single channel video, *untitled (Self*

¹. The concept of ontology used here is an explicit reference to Theodor Adorno's critique in *Negative Dialectics*. See Theodor Adorno. *Negative Dialectics* (Routledge, 2004), 61-96.

Portrait), was presented on a small television with a single pair of headphones attached to it. In the video, Smith performs a choreography directly informed by the procedures required of all prisoners and visitors before being allowed to enter a visitation room: she spreads her arms for a pat-down, shows the bottom of her feet, and opens her mouth to ensure no contraband is hidden inside. In between choreographed movements, she moves in place restlessly. The only point of view shots in the video have us looking down at her feet as she paces back and forth, capturing a peculiar detail, her *Coach* brand loafers. Her body language relays a simultaneous sense of boredom and an attempt to conceal an unbearable anxiety. The ambivalence of her body language is punctured by the writing on the wall behind her; a statement that literally looms in the background reads *You must identify who comes to visit a murderer*. The implications of this statement resonate far beyond the screen. The suggestion that a person imprisoned for such an extreme crime remains linked to the world outside of it, and that this link is innocuous enough that their luxury shoes would not stand out among the fabric of middle class society, counters the moral narrative of what kind of society produces murderers and how removed they are from “us”.

An early version of the video was titled *Father Daughter Dance*, which drew into the work the dynamic of a familial structure, conjuring the absent body of an invisible paternal partner in this peculiar choreography. The father figure suggested in this earlier title is in fact the artist’s father who has been imprisoned in California for twenty years, a fact that imbues Smith’s choreography and the overall tone of the video with a profoundly poignant valence. The space between their bodies is not simply arbitrarily physical and therefore, potentially easily traversed, it is structural, social, and dictated by the abstract and inequitable laws of juridical time. This paternal relationship pierces the aforementioned phrase looming above Smith’s head, simultaneous-

ly complicating it and inverting the proposition. The prompt to identify is no longer addressed exclusively in the direction of the waiting room, it points back at the viewer as part of a chain of normalizing judgement, and opens up a larger question of the social context of crime and punishment that draws the imprisoned back from exile in society's consciousness, back into the present, retrieving his humanity back from social invisibility.

The television on which *untitled (Self Portrait)* was presented was placed at the far end of a rectangular metal table, facing a plastic chair on which viewers were implicitly prompted to sit. The installation's materials and minimal aesthetic echoed the mundane de-personalization tactics employed by institutional spaces in order to simultaneously psychically subdue the inmate and visitor within it. Upon taking a seat at the chair and donning the headphones, viewers became part of a chain of surveillance that began with Smith performing in the video, moving on to the viewer sitting at the chair watching her, to the onlookers in the gallery. As a condition of entering into this performative contract, the viewer had to consciously insert themselves into a chain of surveillance, assuming the role of the good character of substance who functions as the seeing eyes of the prison.

Pivot to the single channel video *How We Tell Stories To Children*, in which a montage of wholesale markets, liquor stores, and a recurring figure of a black youth whose movements are seemingly arrested in time, is punctured by her father's voice. The video opens with an evocative sound, a distorted echo that in the space of the gallery resonated unsettlingly between my gut and chest. Glimpses of the youthful figure returned throughout the course of the video like a haunting, paradoxically cemented in a sliver of physical space and time yet drawn into the present through this re-presentation. The following shot presented a grainy image of sunlight pouring

through a window obstructed by bars, at which point a story began to unfold. A man faced the camera from within the confines of the room illuminated by the sunlight and spoke, “OK, hey daughter...What can I say? I remember when you was a little girl....” He returns again throughout Smith’s video works, an interlocutor always speaking from the confines of the same room, only speaking in the past tense.

LOVE AND HAPPINESS

Smith’s single channel video *Men Who Swallow Themselves In Mirrors* is an amalgamation of images and sounds culled from a constellation of popular culture’s narratives of urban violence, social alienation, and black bodies in literal and symbolic free fall. The video’s montage includes a black and white urban landscape, policemen in riot gear, and young black men charging towards the Hollywood sign as it shakes out of reach. As the video begins, a panning shot reveals a messy kitchen table covered in dirty dishes and prescription pill cases, and a quick glance of a photograph of Smith as an infant. As I sat in the gallery watching the opening shots fade, a rumbling bass that worked its way through my body announced the beginning of a familiar narrative. The next combination of sounds and images presented the blinking lights of a police squad car, the artist’s father singing *Happy Birthday*, followed by a scene from Allen and Albert Hughes’ seminal 1993 film *Menace II Society*.

The scene in the film depicts Caine, a young black man, sitting in the back seat of a car as he and his friends prepare to carry out a drive-by shooting against the men who killed Caine’s cousin. In Smith’s video, Caine’s inner monologue in which he explains, “I seen lots of people killed before...but I ain’t never done it myself,” is left intact while Al Green’s song “Love and

Happiness,” which plays in the background in the original film, is omitted. As the scene unfolds—despite Caine’s reluctance to participate in the drive-by—he nonetheless follows through with the act and kills one of the men who murdered his cousin. The following scene shows Caine lying on his bed as his inner monologue reveals the retaliatory murder gave him no closure, yet he now knew that he could kill again. Since its debut, the Hughes brothers’ film has become an iconic depiction of the kinds of violent, precarious lives lived by young black men in the inner city. As a work of art, it has become larger than itself in the domain of popular culture. Indeed, a cottage industry of films with similar narratives has been established as a cliché, which Smith acknowledges, interjecting in her video a sound bite announcing the *Top Ten Hood Films*.

One of the most haunting moments in *Men Who Swallow Themselves In Mirrors* involves Smith's father, the interlocutor previously introduced in *How We Tell Stories To Children*. As opposed to the frenetic pace of editing employed throughout most of the video, time seems to linger on him, and our attention is returned to him multiple times. In his first appearance in this video, he shares another story about his daughter. This time, the story revolves around her discovery of his concealed handgun; however, his story is cut short and the following shot shows him shaving his head as the beginning of “Love and Happiness” repeats. The song removed from the fictitious scene in *Menace II Society* returns, overlapping with his actions; Green’s melancholic vocal inflection feels poignant as he sings, “...something that can make you do wrong...love.” The culmination of action and song are caught in perpetual deferment, in a similar kind of limbo that the anonymous figure in the previous video seemed to be trapped in. Physical action and musical affect stick together: there is no release into the song’s upbeat guitar riff, no happy resolution.

By removing the song from its use in a fictitious story and inserting it in a perpetual loop with her father whose recollections about his daughter are inflected with longing, Smith builds an arc between the Hughes brothers' film as symbolic of a narrative that has been uncritically circulated, produced, and consumed, and his reality in which time lingers. After holding this moment of deferred action for a considerable amount of time, the story once again abruptly pivots. One of the final scenes of *Men Who Swallow Themselves In Mirrors* drops us into the middle of a jarring confrontation on a subway in which a man yells across the aisle at another passenger, whose face is cut from the frame. What the frame does show is the passenger sitting next to the target of the tirade, a passenger who maintains his stoic composure—eyes cast down, unflinching. As a viewer of the video in the gallery, I found myself thinking how remarkable it is to be able to maintain such a detached composure in the face of this tension, and the coping mechanisms in which retreating into the imaginary becomes necessary or natural. I began to think about how much of waking life is actually lived in the imaginary.

The video was presented as a large-scale projection against the gallery's center free-standing wall. During its running time, by virtue of its scale, sound, and use of montage, the video functioned as a kind of visual anchor. Part of its seductive quality was that it was not necessary to know the specific sources used in the montage to formulate them into a familiar narrative. One only had to have been a viewer of Hollywood films of the past twenty years in order to, almost reflexively, recall representations of violence, urban decay, and the victimization or villainy of young black men. This kind of collective production of images that purport to represent something authentic or universal is symptomatic of the cultural tourism that Dean MacCannell theorized in the mid 1970s. His proposition that "souvenirs are collected by individuals, by

tourists, while ‘sights’ are collected by societies”² is a compelling bridge between the propagation of “hood films” and a collective inability to deal with the aftermath of a crime for both the victim and the perpetrator, and the social structure that produced it. Herein, an inability to identify uncritical consumptions of homogeneous narratives leaves us in the same place as the stoic, unflinching passenger on the train, trying desperately to keep our eyes cast down despite the fury unraveling in our proximity.

THE SPEED OF A PLACE, A LOCAL RHYTHM

The title of Erik Benjamins’ multimedia installation *A group of elderly ramblers passed by our front door on the way to their hearth...* references a chance encounter the artist in the streets of Chengdu, China. As he made his way across a busy street, he abruptly came across a man practicing calligraphy with a wet brush on the pavement writing the phrase “A group of elderly ramblers passed by our front door on the way to their hearth.” The memory of this encounter stayed with him months after he returned to the United States, reflecting on his experiences in the city and on the field recordings and notes that he produced during his stay. The incidental intersection between his planned route from one place to another and a stranger’s meditative practice characterized the kind of unpredictability at the heart of the intuitive document that he had set out to make before he boarded a plane to Chengdu.

². Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (University of California Press, 2013), 42.

The site in which the field recordings were captured in *A group of elderly ramblers...* is People's Park in Chengdu. The historic park is located on what used to be encampment grounds during the Qing Dynasty³ and is now a tourist attraction notable for hosting weekly spontaneous and highly choreographed performances by older residents singing and dancing to karaoke music that combines Western popular culture with music produced by native musicians. In 2016, the New York Times published an article about the park titled "In China, the 'Noisiest park in the World' Tries to Tone Down Rowdy Retirees," describing tensions between performers and surrounding residents whose opinions on appropriate usages and noise levels for public space were in stark opposition. The article detailed how the noise level in the park could sometimes become so loud that the government resorted to installing noise monitoring equipment to contain it. Filmmaker and anthropologist J.P. Sniadecki was quoted in the article to contextualize People's Park for western readers. Briefly explicating the historic and cultural conditions that make such spontaneous actions in the park uniquely Chinese, Sniadecki explained that "in China, parks reflect an enthusiasm for organized collective leisure that is rooted in tradition and socialist values that many people absorbed under Mao Zedong."⁴

What Sniadecki's explication of the tradition of People's Park oversaw, however, was that open dissemination and performance of Eastern and Western music is a relatively new form of collectivity in China. This phenomenon underscores what I posit is at the fissured root of cultural identity. The sounds that make up Benjamins' field recordings of the park do not only reflect the

³. Chris Buckley and Adam Wu, "In China, the 'Noisiest Park in the World' Tries to Tone Down Rowdy Retirees," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2016.

⁴. Buckley and Wu, "The 'Noisiest Park in the World'."

dramatically vacillating genres of music performed to by “rowdy retirees,” their passionate voices amplified by inexpensive amplification systems, and the occasional interjection of a curious passerby; they are sonic documents of new and multiple forms of identification being forged on the literal grounds of state ideological control.

As mentioned earlier, the exhibition *Who Gets to Look* presented the first iteration of *A group of elderly ramblers...*, an immersive installation wherein selections of Benjamins’ field recordings were played in the gallery as part of a six-hour playlist in which no two tracks were repeated throughout the course of a day.⁵ The decision not to loop any track in the playlist was informed by Benjamins’ commitment to preserving a kind of temporal indeterminacy akin to the life of the park. This desire to work against a fixed form when presenting the playlist and the accompanying journal entries imbued the work with a potential for adaptation to the unforeseen dynamics of a given place, space, and time in which it will be re-presented. This characteristic of the work not only means that the possibility to listen to the entirety of the playlist under practical conditions will likely always be impossible, but uses the very *concept of impossibility* as fertile grounds to counter essential notions of self and other. As a documentation of life thriving in a public space, which as a result of national historic and cultural specificity continues to grapple with multiple incongruent notions of proper use, Benjamins’ resistance to fixing the presentation of this work takes on a new meaning. As an attempt to counter didactic models of translation that tourist documents tend to produce, this amorphous document proposes a turn to a form of embodied engagement with an archive of a local rhythm. The sonic tapestry that flows from these

⁵. In the spring of 2017, the second iteration of *A group of elderly ramblers...* was presented as part of a two-day, two artist exhibition titled “Erik Benjamins and Stef Halmos are under pressure,” in which the structure of the Chengdu playlist differed significantly. According to Benjamins, all subsequent iterations of *A group of elderly ramblers...* will present the work with new configurations of text and sound.

field recordings reflects the speed of a place symbolic of a continuous revaluation of national and cultural propriety, a collective made precarious by the individual desires of its constitutive parts.

NECESSARY IMPOSSIBILITY

Whenever I visit a new place that bears some significance to me, or whenever I bear witness to some meaningful event, I am tasked with the question of what to bring back—what *thing* can I point to that might serve as an index of a moment and place. This series of questions is not particular to me; everyone faces it who wishes to remember or relay anything of significance to the future. Whether the chosen object is in the form of a map or a photograph, or whether the after-life of the event is expressed and continuously reconfigured as a memory, the desire to preserve something of the *now* to reference infinitely in the future is inescapable. Regarding photography, despite my knowledge that a photograph is the product of technical and ideological artifice, therefore incapable of being a true index of a then and there, I reflexively use that medium to claim a kind of bearing witness to something real. This relationship to photography is also not unique to me. The photograph is *message without a code*⁶—no mechanism is needed to decipher it. The perceived relationship between photography and something authentic is such that photographs -the artifice on which histories and identities are constructed- can be circulated in the world without scrutiny. Curiously, this belief in the analogous relationship between image and authenticity breaks down in the realm of tourism. The photographs, objects, and stories tourists bring back home are always looked upon with a suspicion of inauthenticity. How could the result of a highly mediated model of cultural interpretation ever purport to be true?

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (Fontana Press, 1977), 17.

In the production of *A group of elderly ramblers...*, Benjamins assumes the role of a traveler attempting to re-present the sounds of public life in the contested space of People's Park, immersing himself in its rhythm without producing an overdetermined, one-dimensional document. His journaling practice, which served a pragmatic purpose in navigating the city, also served as site of reflection for his everyday experiences. In the space of the UAG, the question, "Does spectatorship have a duration?", presented as a single line of text at the entrance of the gallery, was culled from an entry in his journal. As a whole, the journal entries openly reflect his own anxieties and desires as a visitor in an unfamiliar place. In fact, his immersion in experiences that provoked a sense of unease as he traveled alone through a city in which he was unfamiliar with the language, the lay of the land, and the rhythm of a new geographic and cultural space intentionally countered the comforts that tourists unconsciously seek and which the tourism industry minimizes by making all places as familiar as possible.

Although it did not present them in any chronological order, the playlist was loosely comprised of four genres: techno workout, nationalistic orchestra, live performance, and waltz. The genres' sonic affect vacillated among lively choruses, dramatic operatic solos, and high tempos. These tracks alternated with a secondary playlist called "Park Tone," designed to play at a low volume that was mostly inaudible across the room from the speakers, requiring close proximity to each speaker to be heard. The playlists were played from two small karaoke speakers that reflected their popular, inexpensive, mobile, and democratic purpose in contemporary Chinese culture and pointed to the stylized boom boxes popularized by American hip hop culture. The installation also included text culled from Benjamins' journal, re-produced as a line of text that spanned across a single wall from the entry of the gallery to its back. As such, the text func-

tioned as a kind of bridge between Smith's video *Men Who Swallow Themselves In Mirrors* and the sculpture *Landscape 1*. The mosaic-like nature of the playlist and the text pointed to the fractured nature of national and cultural identities and the cacophony that betrays idealized notions of a unified populace, a gesture resonant to manifestations in People's Park.

The auditory volume of the playlist vacillated between filling the gallery space and receding into nearly inaudible whispers lost to all but the most attentive ear, making it often difficult to discern when the interlocutors of People's Park documented in the field recordings began and finished speaking, when and where one track ended and another began. When audible, the voices of these interlocutors punctured the distance between Benjamins as a spectator recording the scene and the subjects being recorded. In these serendipitously documented moments, a subject of observation was fully aware of their being documented and became a producer of the work themselves. In these moments, the dynamic of spectatorship was inverted: whereas the gazer typically looks out at a subject from a safe remove, the recordings took on a dynamic situation in which the subject's "blind reception" took on an equalizing tone.

Because Benjamins treats the notion of impossibility as if it were an almost material component in and of itself, he always appeared to be working in anticipation of the limits of what can be articulated in language. As such, a turn towards embodied experience suggests the potential for discrete, untranslatable experiences to begin to counter didactic articulations of self and other. His decision to make listening to the entire playlist under practical means impossible, coupled his withholding of his complete journal entries and subsequently denying viewers the illusion of cohesion, underscores the inability for subjective experiences to stand in place of objectivity. This condition of impossibility makes it possible to rupture the ideological undergirding at

the heart of national identity and of the notion of the existence of a singular subject that can faithfully represent a whole nation. Paradoxically, impossibility creates space for new possibilities to identify outside of ideology, and in this moment of rising populism across the West, this turn toward the impossible is instrumental to undoing regressive social tendencies based upon mastery, the illusion of cohesive narratives, and essentialist models of identification. The kind of fracturing that Benjamins employs in the presentation of *A group of elderly ramblers...* moves in spirit against the notion of a singular nation and a singular national culture that can be easily instrumentalized to prop up nationalist rhetorics. By exploring the *rhythm* of a place like People's Park and allowing his own anxieties to exist with it rather than attempting to dominate it, the work allows the sound and speed of public life to unravel in its own time and its own cacophonous way.

THE TOURIST

In his seminal 1976 study on sightseeing and tourism titled *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Dean MacCannell employed a sociological methodology to analyze the ways in which middle-class sightseers set out into the world in search of experience.⁷ MacCannell's study considered tourists not as abstractions but as actual beings in the world, and considered the ways in which their experiences inform how modern civilization emerges in the mind through mediated social encounters. In terms of structuring *Who Gets to Look*, MacCannell's study made helped me consider another point of entry toward bridging a tourist's itinerary and a prison cell. Having

⁷. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (University of California Press, 2013), 1.

reflected on the conceptual and aesthetic nuances of both artists' works, I have since found resonances of his theory of social mediation in the corpus of another influential cultural theorist, Stuart Hall.

In a 1983 lecture given at the University of Illinois on the subject of ideology and ideological struggle, Hall articulated the methods by which ideological production is produced and reproduced. In his address to the audience, he stated,

labour is not reproduced inside the social relations of production themselves, but outside of them. It is produced in the domain of the superstructures: in institutions like the family and church. It requires cultural institutions such as the media, trade unions, political parties, et cetera, which are not directly linked with production as such but have the crucial function of 'cultivating labour of a certain moral and cultural kind.'⁸

The "cultivation of a certain kind of labour" that Hall suggests as being produced through cultural institutions is not entirely out of line with Erving Goffman's notion of the existence of "front" and "back" regions to social establishments and structures, and which MacCannell introduced to his theory of tourism as early as 1973.

The *front* represents a meeting place between visitors and hosts where the artifice of some form of cultural experience is formed, while the back is "where the home team retires to relax and prepare,"⁹ where authenticity is perceived to exist. This operation is crucial to maintaining an aura of social reality and creating a sense of accessing *authentic* spaces. "Social structure itself," MacCannell proposed, "is involved in the construction of mystification that supports

⁸. Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies, 1983: A Theoretical History* (Duke University, 2016), 129.

⁹. Dean MacCannell, "Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings," *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol 79, no. 3. (Nov. 1973), 590.

reality.”¹⁰ The appeal to the notion of a singular authentic experience implicitly engendered by front and back spaces resonates with Theodor Adorno’s critique of ontology in *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno’s proposition that “Tacitly, ontology is understood as readiness to sanction a heteronomous order that need not be consciously justified”¹¹ is not so far removed from the parallels between Smith and Benjamins’ work. While Adorno’s proposition was part of a broader critical analysis against the urge to position ontology as universal and sacrosanct, its implications resonate with the seemingly unbridgeable positions of prison and tourism that the works in the exhibition addressed.

The prisoner is removed from the world, existing outside of time, outside of society’s consciousness. Conversely, the tourist is the assumed benefactor of privilege, to whom countless places across the world seem to cater. However, this conception of prisoner and tourist is rigid, denying the spectrum of conditions that exist between them and, more importantly, the way in which they are articulated in the realm of social imagination that requires subconscious identification. Just as real people are participants in a form of tourism every day, real people are contained by the walls of prisons for infinite reasons; both groups are constituted by real people, not simply abstract concepts or symbols of the rungs of hierarchical power.

Today, there are a multitude of reality television shows, movies, websites, social networks, et cetera, in which the world of travel itineraries and prison cells are mediated and made accessible to watch from a comfortable distance. As a passive viewer, I can experience the world vicariously through personalized itineraries that purport to make exotic people, places, and expe-

¹⁰. Ibid., 591.

¹¹. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, (Routledge, 2004), 61.

riences legible through a safe remove. As a viewer, a point of consumption and transmission for these mediations, I may never gain firsthand knowledge of the specificities of a given place or condition of being, but I can easily be seduced into believing that I have some notion of their authenticity through infinite, readily accessible representations of it. If I am fortunate, I will never have a firsthand experience of incarceration or of having to visit a loved one who is incarcerated, but I have an idea of what a prison cell looks like, what kind of person is contained within it and for what reasons. I may never have witnessed gang violence or the cruel and sudden murder of a loved one, but I can immediately recall numerous representations of young men killing each other swiftly with the use of a gun, so easily in fact that this kind of brutality exists as a trope among countless other depictions of violence. As with my relationship with a photograph, my imagined encounters with the world as a product of these mediations are not unique to me.

RUPTURE

A mediated encounter with Otherness was the catalyst for the influential 1961 essay *On Chinese Acting*, written by German playwright Bertolt Brecht. In the essay, Brecht explores the subversive strategy of *alienation* employed by Chinese dramaturgists in their theatrical productions, which he would later develop into the *verfremdungseffekt* that would characterize his epic plays. The alienating effect, as explicated in the essay, is defined as a strategy through which an actor “makes it clear that he knows he is being looked at”¹² and which in turn prevents members of the audiences from becoming unconsciously subsumed by the artifice of the theatrical narrative. The

¹². Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Performance, Messingkauf and Modelbooks* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2000), 130.

alienating effect functions as a kind of rupture, making it difficult for members of the audience to passively, unconsciously immerse themselves in the characters and storylines of any given play (ironically, Brecht's own encounter with Chinese dramaturgy was itself a doubling unconscious alienation from a uniquely cultural form of dramaturgy). In its most potent application, alienation de-naturalizes behavioral, representational, and narrative conventions that actors are typically tasked with performing, which simultaneously are informed by and spill out into the world outside of the stage. For Brecht, this rupture was a vital component of critical aesthetics, a proposition that theatre and all forms of artistic production were potent political platforms and that in order to break the unconscious immersion into the narrative folds of capitalist and fascist ideologies, critical self reflection on behalf of the audience was necessary. Both Benjamins and Smith employ a combination of technical and aesthetic devices that mirror the conceptual and political strategies that the late German playwright considered to be indispensable towards rupturing audiences' suturing into a familiar narrative.

In the chapters *Love and Happiness* and *You must identify*, I explored how Sable Elyse Smith's videos straddle multiple symbolic valences of language and representation, how her work suggests that the boundary between reality and artifice as represented in popular culture is at best porous and precarious. Similarly, in the chapters *Necessary Impossibility* and *The Speed of a Place, A Local Rhythm*, I explored how Erik Benjamins implicitly undercuts the notion of cultural identity as singular, and in turn, pointing to the impossibility of creating a culturally cohesive portrait of a nation from a cacophony of fragments. In considering Brecht's proposition that audiences must be consciously prompted to be self-reflexive and critical of a given narrative, I am moved to consider how individual and collective attempts to locate the seams between au-

thenticity and inauthenticity in both Smith and Benjamin's work curiously reveals the degree to which assumptions about ontology and identity are conflated.

A rudimentary strategy used by state powers to rally masses of people, often with conflicting interests and often against their own interests, is to conjure an imagined community that gives rise to an imagined sense of national identity. On the subject of the formation and instrumentalization of these imagined communities, I turn again to the words of Stuart Hall, who heeded that “the narrative of the nation...lends significance and importance to our humdrum existence, connecting our everyday lives with a national destiny that pre-existed us and will outlive us...the invention of tradition.”¹³ By subtracting all visual representation from his installation and only working with sound and text, Benjamins implicitly works in the realm of the imaginary in order to grapple with what cannot be visually represented. In doing so, he literally turns to the very place in which the myth of the endurance and integrity of the nation state resides. In this turn towards the imaginary, his tourist-inspired document functions as a fruitfully troubling object and Benjamins himself takes up the position of a generatively problematic subject. Herein, the complexity of a tourist and a touristic object is inverted and a new question arises: how does a tourist, either Benjamins, myself, or anyone else interpret an experience with another place or person, without unconsciously projecting oneself onto it or them? It seems that in recourse to the imagination, whether the operation is to interpret a sign or a sound, one is always already translating an encounter with something new under existing subjective terms. This fruitfully troubling characteristic also lies within Smith's work, which similarly requires an unconscious mode of translation in each viewer's imagination.

¹³. Stuart Hall, *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 2005), 613-614.

I turn again to the words of Stuart Hall, this time to his essay “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Culture?” and the perils of casting an uncritical eye towards popular culture’s representations of a totalizing black identity. A particularly compelling passage in the essay reads, “popular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who really are, the truth of our experience. It is an arena that is profoundly mythic. It is a theatre of popular desires, a theatre of popular fantasies.”¹⁴ Hall’s words resonate with Smith’s sculpture *Landscape I*, which suggests that because of calcified homogenous representations of black male masculinity, multiple forms of alternate identities are continuously rendered invisible. *Landscape I* is an eight-foot wide neon sign that reads: “And there are plenty bois/out there screaming”. Its orientation suggests a horizon, not just as an actual space that can be objectively measured but as a metaphor representative of hope and possibility. Yet the “out there” implied in the text simultaneously points to the “in there” of a prison, and the “bois” the neon text refers to carries with it a valence of black hyper-masculinity that is commonly assigned a villainous role in the cultural imaginary; but it also suggests a history of racially motivated emasculation, an affective patois, or perhaps an alternate fluidity of gender.

Within the space of the exhibition, no physical boundaries were erected to section off any of the works from one another so that sonically and visually, the works were free to reflect off each other. A choreography was devised between both artists so that *Men Who Swallow Themselves In Mirrors* could exist in the same space as the playlist of *A group of elderly ramblers...* without necessitating a physical partitioning of space. This choreography was informed by the aforementioned theory of a critical rupture necessarily set in place to disturb a cycle that simul-

¹⁴. Ibid., 477.

taneously makes suffering abstract and glorified. At the end of *Men Who Swallow Themselves In Mirrors*' running time, rather than immediately loop the video back to its starting point, a long pause was incorporated: eight minutes of black, silent space.¹⁵ During this time, the playlist from *A group of elderly ramblers...* became noticeably louder, filling the space with its unpredictable character. By abruptly departing from one visually seductive narrative and transitioning into an entirely sonic experience, this dance between the works of Benjamins and Smith underscored the artifice of narrative and representation. As a viewer having been attendant to the larger than life montage of Smith's video, then suddenly immersed in the sounds of a lively performance of People's Park, I was left with an urge to decipher what felt real, what sounded authentic, and why. These implicit questions were not rhetorical, because when ideologies function as intended, as naturalized and seemingly innocuous "matter of facts", questions of ontology and narrative seem to always have immediate answers.

CONCLUSION

*What does it mean to have a work of art continue to speak to you long after you have left the space of the gallery?*¹⁶

¹⁵. My usage of the word *space* throughout this essay, specifically in relation to sound, is not meant to describe a void or an emptiness. In the conception of the exhibition, despite the fact that Erik Benjamins' work was almost entirely sound-based, its presence was conceived as being as prominent as all of the visual work combined. It was conceived as having volume and weight; as such, Sable Elyse Smith's "spaces" were also conceived of as being equally prominent as her visual work presented in the exhibition.

¹⁶. During my first studio visit with Erik Benjamins in the fall of 2016, we developed a conversation regarding his commitment to producing artwork that would "trouble" a viewer long after they left the space of the gallery. This conversation subsequently developed into a series of conversations regarding the social responsibility of art to complicate narrative, evoke embodied cognition, and work with conditions of indeterminacy and impossibility.

In January of 2017, an essay by Ta-Nehisi Coates was published in *The Atlantic* titled “My President Was Black.”. Often, when I read the title of this essay out loud or think it to myself, it produces a telltale lump in my throat. Towards the conclusion of the essay, Coates laments that “The election of Donald Trump confirmed everything I knew of my country and none of what I could accept.”¹⁷ That frank reflection coupled with the title of the essay continue to work on me, like a *prick*, despite my own reason. Throughout the conception and execution of *Who Gets To Look*, I have sometimes felt that the intersections and parallels between Benjamins’ and Smith’s works, the weight and substance of their implications, might actually be so fundamentally evident that articulating them is more of an exercise in stating common sense than a necessary series of critical and political propositions. However, November 9th, 2016 was a stark reminder that the lessons that all of the theorists and writers that I have referenced throughout this text, and that the artists themselves have suggested through their work, were not as self-evident as I assumed them to be. On that day, fascist and populist tendencies surfaced *en masse*, abetted by appeals to tribal impulses and a rally to protect the fate and integrity of an imagined singular America that had at some point in history been great. There was no possibility for me to alienate myself from the weight of this event. I was dismayed at the shock expressed by so many people in my immediate social circle that racism and nationalism was still a powerful, malignant character in contemporary American society. Acquaintances confessed that their world was “shattered,” their sense of society’s forward move towards equality had been painfully undercut: a collective struggle to “understand” how such an ideologically regressive candidate could have been elected president. Like Coates, I was perhaps even more dismayed at my shock at my own shock, despite

¹⁷. Ta-Nehisi Coates, “My President Was Black,” *The Atlantic*, January 2017.

the fact that in my lifetime I have had little reason to believe in a singular national identity, or that the justice system is grounded in objectivity and is fairly applied to all. I too found myself regressively wanting to fold into the dream of an America for whom social parity was an objective and sacrosanct value. The irony of this dream is that it too is an ideology, a dream that is the product of my own projections and desires manifested as an assumed possibility for the character of a country that never existed.

In *The Culture of Punishment, Prison, Society, and Spectacle*, sociologist Michelle Brown examines the simultaneous exponential growth of the prison industrial complex and individuals' alienation from it. She writes that, "The remoteness of the penal spectator instead guarantees that his imagining of punishment is haunted by abstract potentialities of danger and insecurity. And this spectator as a cultural agent is a formidable force in the construction of pain."¹⁸ Brown's statement moves alongside Dean MacCannell's theorization as to why tourists are seemingly universally derided, noting that, "The term 'tourist' is increasingly used as a derisive label for someone who seems content with his obviously inauthentic experiences."¹⁹

In bringing these two observations together, my attempt is to bring notions of spectatorship of the most seemingly abstract and extreme social conditions closer to everyday life in order to disrupt any sense of inconsequentiality of the production and circulation of ideology that eventually bitterly manifests itself like a lump in the throat that cannot be countered with a stoic disposition.

The impetus for bringing Benjamin's and Smith's works into conversation with each other was an attempt to bring two seemingly, drastically opposed conditions of being—

¹⁸. Michelle Brown, *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society and the Spectacle* (NYU Press, 2009), 17.

¹⁹. MacCannell, "Staged Authenticity," 592.

freedom and captivity, visibility and invisibility, privilege and deprivation—together to examine how the notions of their respective essential conditions both flourish and rot in the space of the social imaginary.

The proposition that cultural tourism could function as a way to understand how distance from any place, subject, or condition of being always already implicates each of us in a kind of touristic way of perceiving the world was the first step towards breaking down essentialized subjectivities. *Who Gets To Look* was meant to function as both a proposition and question regarding whether or not identities ever exist in singular form and what role each of us plays in collective meaning-making. It was also a call towards examining the privilege to look in either direction, to acknowledge the temporary nature of spectatorship, and to consider how individual roles in the collective imaginary can be employed in service of critical engagement. On the notion of the spectacle of suffering, Brown looks to work of Jean Paul Sartre, in an effort to consider how “the imagination embodies the capacity to refuse the present and visualize what is not now the case... to possess an ability to open a space for choice and for action,”²⁰ identifying affective forces that might refuse the present.

To describe the relationship between these seemingly disparate works as a conversation sometimes feels insufficient; perhaps an echo would be a more apt metaphor. Yet in the wake of November 9th, these are questions that must be broached and privileges that must be continuously reevaluated. In retrospect, the relationship between these works and their nuanced commonalities could not have been properly articulated or anticipated before the exhibition came to fruition, or before I thoroughly and thoughtfully spent time with their images and sounds as part of an ex-

²⁰. Michelle Brown, *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society and the Spectacle* (NYU Press, 2009), 88.

ercise in consciously distancing myself from narratives and representation that erase heterogeneity with the veneer of a solid surface. The title of this thesis itself suggests that there is no unified subject in the realm of representation-either individual or national. It is a proposition that individuals and nations are the products of ideological cacophonies and incongruent desires and projections of those desires. I close this text with another quote from the hauntingly thoughtful words of Stuart Hall, whose words often read as if he had written them on the same day as I come across them, words that in the exhaustive character of this moment feel almost impossible to imagine yet fill my work with purpose: “I want to end simply by reminding you that this end is also a beginning.”²¹

²¹. Hall, *Critical Dialogues*, 479.

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